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SUBJECT: CANADA ON U.S. POLICY TOWARD BELARUS -- ENGAGE
FOREIGN NGO'S

REF: SECSTATE 188900

Classified By: POLMINCOUNS Brian Flora, reasons 1.4 (b) (d)

1. (C) Poloff shared U.S. views on democratization toward Belarus with Habib Massoud, Deputy Director at Foreign Affairs Canada for Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldavia. Massoud was grateful for the readout of U.S. intentions in Belarus and explained how Canada views its role in the region. As part of the International Policy Statement, Canada is trying to focus more effectively on issues where it has a comparative advantage, and on specific regions and countries where its influence can make a difference. The view of the GOC is that Ukraine is more ripe for lasting reforms than Belarus and is so more susceptible to specific Canadian initiatives. With regards to Belarus, Canada does not have strong interests, and does not see the country as very reformable, so it will engage it on the same level as Turkmenistan, effectively as a human rights problem. Massoud did, however, indicate that Canada could shift its efforts quickly if there were indications of a workable program for reform taking hold in the short-term. He said he would review our program with this in mind.

2. (C) With regards to specific aspects of Belarus policy and possibilities, Massoud suggested that we try to involve foreign NGOs in media outreach and in democratization programs. He said that Serbian youth NGOs, for example, were among the most effective in spreading the democratic fervor to Ukraine and thought there may be a way to similarly get them involved in Belarus. They would be more effective even than foreign governments. Massoud also said he believes European countries will need to get more involved to make any efforts effective, and expressed Canada's disappointment that they are not. U.S. support for democratization is key symbolically but also distant, whereas countries such as Poland, with a more immediate interest in the transition in Belarus, should be able to do more and to do it more effectively. There is also the danger, Massoud believes, of too close association of democratization efforts by the U.S., which could be presented as a CIA plot to control the country and thus backfire.

3. (C) Massoud believes that countries like Canada would be able to shift resources quickly once there is an indication that things are moving in the right direction. He does not believe this will happen for 2006, and said that the GOC has effectively written off the 2006 elections, and would focus instead on 2010. He is not, in any event, convinced that Lukashenko is so unpopular, and thinks he might be able to win a free and fair election on his own. Massoud believes including Russia as part of the strategy is also key, and he thinks there is a good chance that Russia in the end may do the right thing, not because it believes in democracy, but because Moscow too is tiring of the old-school regime in Belarus and fears instability that its perpetuation could bring.

4. (SBU) Finally, Massoud asked about U.S. preparations for the Parliamentary elections in Ukraine, and asked for us to share anything we can in that regard to better inform Canada's preparations.

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